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A NATIONAL THEATRE IN AMERICA: AN OPPORTUNITY

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"The Theatre is a crucible of civilization. It is a place of Human Communism. It is in the theatre that the public soul is formed."

Victor Hugo.

Yesterday the theatre was a luxury, a pastime, a world by itself. Today the whole attitude of mind has changed. There has been a period of awakening and the theatre is attaining a significance never known before. Socially the world is trying to speak, and that utterance is coming in the form of an art which beyond all other arts gives opportunity for social expression--the art of the theatre. The re-awakened interest in the drama of these days indicates a timid desire on the part of the people for an expression of themselves, a fuller living and experience. It is a reflection of the world-wide pushing out in all directions that is termed human progress. This interest in the drama is in such widely diversified directions, and is so much a mirror of the life of change of today, that an adequate summary of the movement is almost impossible. But it is significant that in a decade's time more new blood has been fused into this art of life than for three centuries before. It has come about in an age of confusion and experiment, in an age dissatisfied with the old order of things, in an age busy with the creation of a new religious and economic freedom. It has come---this revolt in the drama.

In our ambition to measure intelligence, in our haste to turn the wheels of progress, we have somehow forgotten the pioneering creative spirit. We have been told again and again that a university could consist of a great teacher sitting on one end of a log and a student sitting on the other. Most of us who have been victims of the worship of intellectual institutions now know that they are used for an exchange of second-hand ideas, and we are asking ourselves whether we should so stifle the joy of living. We know that the mere accumulation and molding of fact and matter into something resembling intellect does not prepare us to meet the things of life. We know that life is made up of prejudice, love, intolerance and desire, as well as of machinery, ledgers and dollar bills. Why should these youngsters, who follow us, quench their desire for truth in order to maintain a well equipped machine?

It is this quest for the joy of finding something new, for the giving of something old, whether in school or on prairie farm, that has given the theatre and the drama a new impetus in an age of "mass production". It is the irresistible little thrill that creeps up and down the backbone, the sheer joy of flinging the arms wide to the world, the purging of the flames of sorrow, that has energized the pendulum in its swing to the heights of dramatic expression.

It is not easy to confine this desire to create within limits. The impulse of imitation, the instinct of representation, upon which Aristotle based his theories, must find a place to grow, not only in the greatest, but in the humblest manifestations. Without exciting the antagonism which comes with the inevitable argument dependent upon creeds, this creative spirit can express the beauty which religion in all forms is expressing. It can aid science in the new humanism devoted "Not simply to truth, but to other men!"# It can and must help the man in industry to some small portion of self-respect and happiness. It must and will lead each individual into a share of the exploring and remaking of this interesting world of ours, that we may live together joyfully and respectably.

Its extent is not limited to the human race alone as a unit. In spite of the notion that "poets are born, not made", the power to create varies in degree only in each individual. No sharp line of demarcation can be made between the "Bobby" Burns of all ages and the farmer who says good-night to his horses after the evening chores, or between Kreisler on the Symphony stage and "Mellie" on a soap-box in front of a country cross-roads store. They are of the same company, of the same spirit, except that the extent of the development of their personal endowment reaches a different height.

George Sarton

Any attempt to thwart in man this tendency to pioneer can only end in revolt. "Socially, the man of this kind who has never known the satisfaction of creative work, contributes no more than the man who revolts."# We need only to look about us today to note the effect of organized religion, organized education, organized industry, in all aspects, upon the spirit of a people. When the real business of living has been suppressed, when emotional honesty has been forgotten, when god-like joy in work well done has been usurped by a twelve-hour pay for a six-hour labor, how can we expect much "brotherhood of man" to eminate for the neighbor of next door or the stranger of far-off lands. It is in the encouragement of the creative spirit that man's material and spiritual life becomes mellow and joyous.

In this revolt from the order of old things, the old hide-bound conventions of society were the first to meet the axe. The religious world met with change before the world of art. It may seem strange to us that nations, and more especially American "the land of the Free", should have neglected the theatre, until we recognize two factors that have aided in the stagnation of all art; they are the degradation of art ideals (the desire to explore the sewers of life), and the musuem habit of mind.

There has been a fad or cult for unhealthy art,

The Creative Spirit--Rollo Walter Brown

for pseudo art. It has, we hope, reached its height in the theatre of the present time, where the honest artist in the making, sees some Michael Arlen parade as propaganda the smut and sordidness of human life, and in so doing become the idol of thousands of matinee-minded men and women. Is it any wonder that this youthful aspirant turns away in disgust? We do not question the right or even the desire of one to explore the sewers, for by so doing he may discover the cause of the odor, but we do question his sanity if he insists on remaining in the sewer, only to add to the stench. Life is a serious and a joyous business--he must treat it sincerely.

On the other hand, our art has not had time to flower but has been transplanted for us, full grown, and kept under a glass case with a "hands off" sign plainly in view. As a consequence no ordinary man is able to decide for himself whether the work, be it music, painting or any other form, is true and sincere unless it is labeled, and even then, if he finds that he likes it, he is ashamed or unable to tell why. To the average man, the mention of an art canvas means nothing more than a brass-buttoned custodian and an art catalog; the rendering of Beethoven, no more than hard seats and an unreadable program; a production of Shakespeare, no more than his rubbers and a suburban timetable. He has been in the musuem habit of mind so long; art has been a thing outside of himself.

Yet drama is an art which is essentially democratic in character. It is an art which springs out of social activity and is incomplete without it. Anyone who has attended the dress rehearsal of a play knows that it seems "flat, stale and unprofitable", and yet, when the auditorium is filled with intelligent humanity he is aware that the same lines and situations take on a new virility. Drama has its very beginning in the social activities of man, it depends upon them and is incomplete without them. It is the means of expression not only man himself, but the environment in which he lives, the air he breathes, the friend he loves--in short his very background. Not only is it dependent upon man for life, but it is a creation of man's own making. It is identical with the substance of the thing signified. In art, the substance of the art is translated into forms indicative of the values of spiritual humanity, but in drama, the artist and the auditor employ the same symbols. Both live, both love, both die. The auditor is the artist and the artist is the auditor.

Furthermore, drama implies the use of all the other arts and presents every facility for the treatment of man in an all-inclusive sense. It is in its deepest sense a creation of the people. "Hamlet", we have found by recent experiment, has become modern in the truest sense of that term; it has been interpreted not only in the light of Elizabethan England but in the meaning of England of all time. And above all, drama, like the movements of the evolutionary processes themselves as applied to humanity,

operates by the fusing of men into Man. Through its universal appeal, its background of human life, its massed social sense, its three-fold cooperation between writer, player and auditor, drama is the one democratic and social art of all arts.

If then the theatre is the "means of resigning of oneself, the abdication of egotism and aggrandizement inorder to assume a better role"#; if it is the "means of strengthening human reason and enlightening the whole nation"#; if it holds within its doors an opportunity for a true social creative apirit, how far has it accomplished these things in its revolt, and has it an opportunity awaiting it in the future? How far can the substance of our art of the theatre be one with the substance of our society? How far can the motives of our art be one with the motives of our social life--a law that has been observed with more or less closeness by continental countries.

1 Michelet LEtudiant

3 2 Mercier

"The Theatre stands in relation to drama much as the art gallery stands in relation to painting." Drama is not properly termed drama except as it is a literature to be witnessed by an audience; a literature to be seen and heard as well as read. To read a play in the confines of one's study is like playing Wagner's "Parsifal" on a trombone, or smelling a paper violet. It is not adequate. The theatre is the place where the canvas of the drama is hung. Indeed, it is the canvas itself upon which the picture of life is painted.

When one speaks of the theatre he no longer refers only to the play or actor or production. He uses a term which now covers all of the technical and professional aspects of that institution. The theatre uses the stage picture, the musical motif, the dance rythm, the color chart, the drawing pencil, and blends some of all of these into a wonderland of illusionment. It now concentrates the services of all the arts into one, and creates for us paintings of human life. Yet in spite of these opportunities for a synthesis of all the arts, the theatre is still in a state of transition, a state of turmoil.

The problems of the drama and the theatre of one century may easily be stated in the terms of the problems of other centuries. The evils of the traveling troupe, similar to our once familiar road-shows, were understood and corrected in Germany during the third quarter of the eighteenth century. France knew and overcame the theatri-

cal monoply a hundred years before Molière. The prejudice and ignorance of Puritan England without the theatre, vied with the prejudice and ignorance of Puritan England within the theatre. A brief glance over the history of the theatre reveals that the drama is and always has been by its very nature an accurate reflection of the thought of the people. The fatalistic philosophy of the Greeks was tied up in their trilogies; the honor of Spain enthroned in "The Cid"; the romance of France in "Hernani"; the glories of England in her early English drama, and the lather of America's democracy in her "Revue of 1925".

This same glance proves that no drama has existed without some form of theatrical organization. In Greece the drama was presented in a vast municipal theatre as a function of the State. In Mediaeval times it was presented by religious bodies, artisans and guilds. Molière formed his own professional traveling troupe. Shakespeare wrote the world's masterpieces for a specific and definite company of actors and for a special audience. Today, Mr. Anybody writes his "revue" for an "art for money's sake" manager and an "amuse me if you can" audience.

But the energized pendulum has begun its return trip. For two and a half centuries Shakespeare was the single steady light in the theatre. During the non-literary century of England's existence, the theatre was kept alive by a gifted band of men who sacrificed a great deal to sustain the traditions of good acting. After these many

years of sacrifice, the pendulum swung to the extreme and the public became mad with sentimental emotionalism. There are those who will say that that same public always will be of the "Revue" mind, but many begin to see in the mist of the future the slow but sure return of the pendulum to its steady and former reach. At least they may gaze and dream.

The first intimation that the pendulum had begun its return has been brought to our attention by the countries of continental Europe. In every town of any size in Russia, France, or Germany, we find the theatre either owned by the city and provided with a building, or, if it is under private financial control, it is not without an enthusiastic patronage. At any rate the theatre is guaranteed a dramatic welfare in these continental countries, both financial and social.

An account of a report of the Municipal Council in a foremost Dutch city might be of interest. There was a fierce discussion anent the director who was to obtain a lease of the finely equipped theatre. A leading councilor got up and said: "I am astounded that there are still people who decline to consider this theatre question seriously, who begrudge the few thousands a year which the Municipality grants, who still look upon the playhouse as a house of pleasure. In my opinion the times are past when we took our boys and girls to the theatre as a kind of reward for good behavior. We should take them to the theatre for the cultivation of their minds in that which is great and beautiful. Talk of higher education.

Is not the theatre a greater school than the class room? Do we not give music in public places, do we not try to educate the masses by diverting their mind through art from that which is sordid and material?" Imagine, if you can, Babbitt uttering such a statement in a town meeting in America!

One can show that there exist and have existed for some years, playhouses in Europe so far removed from the commercial theatre as to warrant the prophecy that such a theatre is due in America. While the conditions in Europe were never so bad as they have been here in the matter of business getting a strangle hold on art, yet they were quite as stereotyped from the artist's viewpoint. The protests of Fuchs in Germany, Antoine in France, and Craig in England, against this conventional idea now sound like those of extreme radicals.

The revolt started with the Théâtre Libre founded by the French actor Antoine in 1887 in Paris, where for nearly a decade he produced, under disheartening conditions the most radical compositions of naturalistic and realistic writers. Within six years after the founding of the Théâtre Libre, Paul Fort in the Théâtre d'Art and Alexander Lugne-Poe in the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre were cultivating Shelley, Verlaine and Maeterlinck, and setting their faces against realism. France, the birthplace of the revolt, has remained ultra-conservative for the most part.

The Théâtre Libre was soon followed by the Frei Bühne at Berlin in 1889 and the Independent Theatre of J. T. Grein in London in 1891. True to the idea they imitated, these two theatres were devoted to naturalism or realism as an art standard and were opposed to the commercial theatre. The Frei Bühne had a wide effect upon the playhouses in Germany until the old traditional houses were driven out and a new drama and new ideas for production came into being. The whole country has grown with the movement and it is not unusual to find court and commercial productions very closely approaching an art ideal. Indeed, their original problem was not that of the commercialized playhouse, for they have always had some endowed theatres, but rather the problem of increasing the number of experienced directors to reorganize these theatres. By the ti time Jacques Rouché founded in 1907 the Théâtre des Arts, and Jacques Copeau in 1913 organized a fine acting company in France, Max Reinhardt had developed into a unique figure and director in Germany. No matter how professional he may seem as an actor and director, his first ventures were amateur in spirit--a product of the revolt.

In England, the impetus given by the Independent Theatre was increased until the movement culminated in the development of an important group of playwrights such as Shaw, Barker, Galsworthy, and the establishment of a number of repertory theatres which are still keeping alive the best of her dramatic heritage. However professional

some of these English and Irish ventures have become, they were essentially amateurish in impulse and their relationship to our American Little Theatre is close. London is the Broadway of England, and it was the play-starved audiences of the provinces that had an important part in calling forth these ne theatres of Dublin, Manchester, Glasgow and Birmingham. Those that remain do so because they must satisfy a need for dramatic entertainment, as well as a place for a Yeats, a Synge, and a Lady Gregory to speak.

An examination of the Theatre in Russia reveals that it is composed of many theatres forming an organism, the parts make a complete and unified whole. Underlying this organism is the idea that it is an institution of the people, an expression of the life and spirit of the people. The famous Moscow Art Theatre may be mentioned as one of the many units beginning not unlike many of our "Art and "Little" theatres in America--with an amateur reform. The points about this particular organization that should impress us most, are its non-star body of actors who love their work, its training school for actors, and its administration of a holding group and intelligent artist-director and business secretary who are unhampered. As a result, it has arrived at an ideal type of production while experimenting and has succeeded in training artists who have helped to revolutionize the commercial theatre. The vitality underlying the Russian theatre has been equal to the onslaught of moral, economic, and material uncertainties of war and revolution.

To the Russian, the theatre is not a refuge for idle amusement, but an explanation and a purging of the experiences of life. It is an art and everyone connected with it must be an artist.

Again we say that the theatre of the European countries is gguaranteed a dramatic welfare arising from a rebellious movement that brought about at least one thing--the restoration of a healthy relationship between the drama and the social functions of life. The revolt broke down the old notions concerning professionalism, reformed the artificial form of acting, and proved that no setting at all was better than the old artificial and spectacular background. It has given those same countries a new professional outlook, for such subsidized theatres, with their just schemes of salaries and permament engagements, attract the best of the acting profession. A competent company of actors enjoying a permament job form the best possible school of acting. Whereas the American system tries to force the market, the continental system tries to supply the market. There is a close relationship between the source of supply and the consumer. The drama is a factor in the European national life, not a plaything.

Yet the best theatres of Europe are merely specialized experimental laboratories. The institution of the theatre has only begun to take root in the world with a brave attempt now and then at premature foliage. An offshoot of this root of foreign source is becoming thoroly imbued with real American enthusiasm. Like all small children, precocious and impudent

at times, this budding American drama has had its period of imitation, and is now slowly developing into full maturity under the urge of native inspiration.

From the date of the first theatre in America at Williamsburg, Virginia, through the first plays acted in New York, Philadelphia, Boston and the "barnstormed" west,--from the event of the Hallams with "The Merchant of Venice" in 1752, through the palmy days of Warren, Jefferson, Booth, Marlowe and Cohan, the progress of the American theatre has been filled with romance, misgivings and hope.

The element of commercialism was a marked one as early as the last decade of the Ninteenth Century we are told by Hornblow, and as a result by 1909 the stage was filled with a multiplicity of trashy plays, and the stock system was dead. In 1909 a group of earnest theatre-lovers sought to remedy the situation by agitating for a National Theatre, endowed not by the State but by Wealth. As might have been expected, Wealth could not successfully found overnight an institution which European countries have created during long years of tender and loving care. Wealth could not substitute for the heart of the people and the well meant scheme was a colossal failure.

Since the failure of the National Theatre fifteen years ago, the professional theatre has had a tremendous growth as a commercial enterprise. Theatres have sprung up overnight like mushrooms--many have proved toad-stools--until some seventy such buildings are found on Broadway. Since the disappearance of the stock company there has been no theatre in New York with a fixed policy or special clientele as in the days of Wallack or Daly. All the present-day

theatres in that city--with the exception of those founded on an amateur basis--are conducted as a purely commercial enterprise on the combination play, their stages being at the disposal of whatever attractions come along. Managers admit they are not in the business for their health and the result of this commercialism has been the demoralization of ~~the~~ the dramatist, actor and public. Play production is one form of speculation and the policy is to exploit ready-made stars and make all the money possible. New pieces, hastily written, are thrown on the stage in the hope they will make a "go". Highly imaginative press agents feed the newspapers with trivial gossip. Here and there managers are taking heed of the amateur movements and are attempting to introduce Art as well as Business into the theatre, but they must reap what they have sown. More and more the professional stage is being confined within the boundaries of Broadway--a world unto itself--because nowhere else can it find an audience to meet the expenses of production. It is the amateur stage west of Broadway that is making itself felt as a force with its annual crop of actors, producers, scenic designers and actors.

It was about the year 1910 that the theatre found in the motion picture a new and formidable rival with which to contend--a rival that has not lost in popularity as the years have gone by. So large and popular and spectacular has this form of entertainment become that even in 1918 the annual receipts were estimated at not far below two million dollars.

So far reaching has been its influence that Walter Pritchard Eaton would lay at its door the inability of the modern youth to fix his attention upon any idea for any length of time. Aside,from the obvious injurious effect the motion picture has had on the finances of the legitimate drama, its greedy and tremendous growth, with a few exceptions, has fed and still is feeding to the millions, both young and old, anaemic public morals cloaked with sickly sentiment and far-fetched heroics. So successful has been this exploitation that even the legitimate drama has caught the fever and now caters to the maudlin giggles of silly women and the sensuous guffaw of "tired business" men in plays like the "Vortex" and "The Green Hat", or in the overdone monotony of legs in the thousand and one revues of Broadway.

With the onslaught of the movies, or about the same time, there sprang up all over the states, organizations of amateurs who aimed at the production of good plays which might never enrich the manager's coffers. The idea, with an ancestry of forty years of continental Europe, was borrowed of Andre Antoine's "Free Theatre" in Paris, and was given impetus by the Little Theatre of Chicago conducted by Maurice Brown. A stretch of conscience might place the beginning of the rebellion as far back as 1892 with the Theatre of Arts and Letters, or with less effort, in 1906 and 1907 with the founding in Chicago of the New Theatre under Victor Mapes, the Robertson Players under Donald Robertson and the Hull House Theatre under Laura Pelham. Practically speaking, the true

birth of reform began in 1911 with Maurice Brown in Chicago and the almost simultaneous appearance of the Toy Theatre of Boston and the Wisconsin Dramatic Society founded by Dickinson. Of these, only the latter exists today.

Similar successful experiments in other cities include the Little Theatre of Indianapolis, Washington Square Players, Provincetwon Players, the Neighborhood House, Arts and Crafts Theatre in Detroit, the Portmanteau Players, the Dallas Little Theatre, and many others. Of these and their influence, Walter Pritchard Eaton has to say: "Their audiencees numerically are but a drop in the bucket. Yet they are a sign, a portent which cannot be ignored. They are a protest against the easy, safe professionalism which has divorced our drama from all serious contact with the problems of actual life . . . which has left the public without any control over its esthetic expression in the play house. The drama of tomorrow must be reborn out of an amateur spirit and the increasing number of amateurs who are giving themselves gladly to the task today is the most hopeful sign in our theatre."

The growth in number and size of these "Little theatres" about the country has been startling, yet not more than a baker's dozen are today getting, in any large way, the result which they set out to bring about--the establishment of an Art theatre. Their greatest fault seems to lie in the confusion of ideals and lack of definiteness of organization and purpose. Each group has been and still is working blindly, without profiting by the mistakes of others

and without any understanding of the broader aspect of the movement. Some of these would become "Art Theatres" and have in a measure succeeded, as the Cleveland Playhouse and the playhouse at Santa Barbara. Others are little more than playthings for society women and aesthetic young men.

Their conception was boldly experimental. They were to be the exact opposite of the commercial stage in financial organization, in method and manner of presentation of the plays chosen, but they have apparently tended toward an emulation of Broadway tendencies on the one hand, or the development of an insipid Little Theatre tradition based on the presentation of pleasant little plays on the other. Many students have felt that there was a danger of these little theatres commercializing their art in an appeal of sentiments and emotions begetting uncontrolled laughter, but it would seem at the present time that their influence has not been that positive. Certainly any such result of commercialized art would but place them in the professional field, without any of the actual professional purifying agents.

It was too much to expect at the time of the flare-up of little theatres that the communities of America were ready for the setting of an Art Theatre intheir midst. They would not, could not bolt this institution downright as a cure-all. It was destined to become more of a social fad and toy. It is only fair to them however to note that they have exerted a healthy influence on the Professional theatre and have given to Broadway such people as Helen Gahagan, Woodward

Thompson, Rollo Peters, Katherine Cornell, Norman Geddes, Lee Simonson and Eugene O'Neill. Now that the first brilliant outburst of flame has died down, we may hope that the remaining embers under the tempering wind of necessity will glow steadily and sanely, with here and there a tongue of red and blue to add life and color to the night.

Simultaneously with the reawakened interest as evidenced by the little theatres, began a recognition of the dramatic in schools and colleges, the rise of organization for study of the drama. Just a hundred years ago, Timothy Dwight declared at Yale: "To indulge a taste for play-going means nothing more or less than the loss of that most valuable treasure, the immortal soul." And now Yale would damn its soul to eternal perdition in the form of George Pierce Baker. Perhaps the shadowy form of Eli became frightened at the thought of immortality and graciously acquiesced in favor of John of Harvard. In the meantime Professor Baker is looking keenly through his glasses into the future.

For years the only plays seen in college were those put on at commencement time as a stunt. Shakespeare, purged edition, was read and taught as a literature, and a very dry kind of literature at that. Occasionally some brave soul dared to give a mild performance of "The Merchant of Venice" on the college rostrum. Many of these same brave souls might tell stories of discipline for attempting to suggest to the college president that man was an emotional as well as an intellectual creature. But youth is dramatic, and it began to

think of drama as something that might have a place outside the recitation hall, since there seemed to be no room within. Under the pressure of these dramatically inclined students--all honor to their courage--the educational institutions began to accept the drama as a matter of course. "The History of the Greek Drama", the "Restoration Drama", "The Theory of the Drama"---all became close rivals to the old course in Shakespeare until "The metamorphosis has been so through, the revenge of the Greeks upon our Puritan morality so complete, that from Florida to Washington, no son of a Methodist bishop can be graduated without the knowledge that there is, always has been and probably always will be such a thing as a Theatre". The university student is now being graduated with the idea that drama is comething to be acted, something to be mounted artistically, something to be seen and enjoyed.

Thus far the movement inthe college and university has seldom carried the idea beyond the amateur experiment excepting perhaps Yale and Carnegie Institute of Technology who have more nearly approximated the thoroness of professional schools of institutions of learning. It has been helpful to the experimenters, but not immediately to the theatre at large. Under the revival of old forms and the experiment of new conceptions, there has grown a new notion of the possibilities of the theatre not only in the past but also in the future. It is the new experimental idea of youth that is the essence of progress in the theatre of America, and which has created almost as many little theatres within the college walls as without. They are

there, not because the college authorities found in the theatre another keen edge for intellect, but because youth found an outlet for its stifled imagination and emotion. Youth itself has been the first to realize that a mere training of the intellect is not sufficient equipment for the business of living. It knows only too well the many hours of sleep wasted in an attempt to stay awake while some unsmiling professor has droned out a second-hand philosophy, or a fellow student has mumbled over an uninteresting and unintelligible report. It knows that inspiration can be gained in the freedom of the experimental laboratory, even though that experiment is seldom carried beyond the amateur point of view.

A volume would be required to complete a survey of this typically American movement, for we should find the thoroness of the work varying from Yale to Harvard, fromthe University of North Carolina to the University of Washington, from the Dramatic School of New York to the High School of Piedmont, California. The names of Thomas Wood Stevens, Sam Hume, George Pierce Baker, E. C. Mabie, and countless other pioneers would become familiar. The laboratory stages and equipment of these prairie and mountain cultural centers would come as a suprise to us. And all because of the limitless energy and dramatic inclination of the youth of America. Expression is evolution, and because American colleges are so constituted that if one college can prove the champion of a new cause, others will espouse it, the growth of the drama in the educational world has been short of picturesque.

The recent national conference on the drama in American Universities and Little Theatres held at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, Pittsburg, Pennslyvania., would seem to be a most important move in the nation wide awakening and rebirth of the theatre in America. The fact that about two hundred delegates of educational institutions and amateur theatres from all parts of the United States should gather for the sole purpose of manifesting their interest in the dramatic future of the country, gives hope to the idea that thought the time amy soon arrive then the professional company will never leave Broadway, the day is to come then the "hinterland" shall provide its own people with a drama born of a true creative spirit.

Until the last few years the theatre in the United States has been dependent upon the professional actor and manager for its existence. That existence has been most thrifty in New York, where in the last fifteen years the approximate number of theatres has increased from fifteen to seventy. In a large sense it has been a purely commercial and competitive enterprise, fostered and encouraged by a tourist population which demands its recreation served on a platter. With the increased growth of the theatres on Broadway, has come the death of the spoken drama on the road, due, in some measure, to transportation, and in no small degree to the invasion of the movies.

The greater the indulgence, the greater the reaction.

In the world of religion there has been a renovation of old worn-out creeds and formal doctrines. In Art this reaction has begun an amateur renaissance in the drama and theatre, unhampered by the money bags of the commercial manager, or the raucous laughs of a witless audience. Men and women of vision, of dreams, of inspiration have dared to "Become tailor of her majesty, Life".

We are on the threshold of something in the drama. That the problems of this something are many and varied, all realize. Otto H. Kahn, who is interested in the drama as an "amateur", believes that the theatre must first of all decentralize--break loose from the apron stings of the New York managers. Brock Pemberton, on the other hand, would not be so ready to admit that America should do without the professional stage. He believes there is room for both Broadway and Main Street. Rudolph Kommer, who comes as a representative of Max Reinhardt, can see but little difference between the problems of the American stage and the problems of the European stage, other than the obvious geographical differences. Mr. Richard Boleslavsky of the Laboratory Theatre of New York believes with convincing sincerity that there is no theatre where there is no actor, and there is no actor where there is no place for him to contemplate, to search, to create.

As one listened to the various personalities at the conference talk on the different phases and problems of the theatre, he was impressed with the inability of the men of the theatre, professional and amateur, to work together in a common cause, or what was still worse, their inability to agree

on the common cause. Perhaps there is no common cause to be found. The "Little Theatre" would turn up its nose at the college and university attempts as all well and food in their way, but as dryly academic, and lacking the professional view point. It would have its School of the Theatre, but would most carefully avoid Calculus and Greek. The "University" theatre seems not to know what it is doing. It is not sure whether it should throw a wrench into its academic machinery and strike out boldly into the field of dramatic art, or whether it should walk the line of compromise. Dramatic schools, schools of speech, and their kindred, are politely ignored as nonentities. Who knows but that these quiet workers are sowing the seed of promise?

With such divergence of opinion among the great personalities, what are the lesser folk to do about the problem? Are they to take notes at a conference and meekly go home to do as they have always been doing? Is there anything that can be done? Will the establishment of little theatres about the country such as those at Cleveland and Santa Barbara, satisfy the needs and longings of thepeople, Or will it mean the conduct of a number of theatres in the land, with trained companies playing to three dollar seats of "intelligensia"? Will the University paint a set, put on a show, graduate the respective actor with an "A" and say "well done"?

It is true that much is accomplished for a few individuals by these existing agencies, but what about the millions of people who are starving for an opportunity to play, to make-believe, to put their pretend caps on? Because a

man must spend eight hours a day at a lever in a factory, because a woman must spend many weary hours over a kitchen stove, are we to tell them that their only hope for recreation lies in the movie and the automobile, As the theatre of the past neglected its young men and women, we, today, are neglecting ours, stilling, under the speeding demand of a competitive industrial system, the songs they would sing. What are we to do for these average men and women of the thousands of communities, for these countless numbers of growing boys and girls?

It would seem that we need not only a theatre, but an audience as well. "The fact that the child plays without being forced to, plays always, plays of his own volition, and that no one has to teach the child to play, to create his own theatre, proves that nature put some will to the theatre." A Napoleon needs the audience of the world. Willie is sufficient unto himself; and lest Willie become dissatisfied and discontented with his own sufficiency and sweep us into crime and revolution, cannot we direct his "Will to the theatre" in some saner fashion?

As we look over the field of American Drama and see the professional stage, the little theatre and the college theatre pulling and tugging each in its own way, we cannot say that these agencies may not soon bring about a bed of ease, but we can say that all three have forgotten in their lack of organized ideas, not the actor or the play, but the audience. An audience is indispensable to both Napoleon and Willie. As capable an amateur director as Sam Hume recognized

this fact in his work in Detroit and California, by teaching his audiences an appreciation of the drama through the medium of the school-teacher. The theatre, either professional or amateur, can only live healthily in the presence of public desire or demand, and that same theatre must expend much of its energy toward fostering that appreciative demand if it would live.

It is here that the college and university have an opportunity of which they are but slightly aware. The college and university (especially those supported by the people of the state) are, in their organization and situation, peculiarly adapted to the task, provided those in control have evolved beyond Puritan bigotry. This does not mean that every college and university must have its school of the drama, but only the chosen few would teach the theatre in practice as thoroly as medicine, law, or business is taught. One such institution in each state might be the means and inspiration for a state theatre. In time its competent graduates might spread the gospel of the drama throughout the youth of the state, maintain a community theatre and a professional company to travel from town to town, thus insuring an artistry of production, and an audience of enthusiasts--an audience keenly alive to life. It is here that we believe lies an opportunity for a national theatre in America.

The word "national" in relation to the theatre as used in this discussion does not mean the founding of any one building or even a series of buildings to house the drama. Granville Barker and William Archer found that plans and schemes and estimates for a National Theatre in England did not bring about the desired result. Nor does our use of the term "national" mean the establishment of a conservatory for the training of an actor, nor the compilation of a dramatic library, nor courses in play-writing and costume-design. These may be the end, but certainly not the aim of our idea of a national theatre. Our use of the term does imply that intangible something which springs from the soil itself, that mysterious element that goes to make anything truly national; it does mean an expression of the life and spirit of a people.

We are a nation of nationalities. The fact is printed on our countenances so indelibly that the humblest peasant in Europe does not mistake us. One of our well known critics states that while he is considered a foreigner at home, abroad he is put to torture for his intolerable Americanism. This quality of Americanism is so widespread and so contagious a part of our culture, that whether easterner or westerner, black or white, every native is stamped with the "national" stamp. We have developed a culture of mass education, efficient industrialism, political intolerance, that is known everywhere. Yet the theatre, an institution of the very life blood of a people, has been almost the last to take on this distinct national coloring. And it is just as well! Providence has been kind to the drama in thrusting upon it the

need of struggle and slow growth, the need of a national fostering arising from a universal interest of the people. It is this universal national theatre in which we are interested.

How are we to obtain this national feeling for the drama and theatre? Can it be forced by the few upon the many? Not when we consider the size of America and the numbers and variety of her people! By means of an Endowed Theatre you say? If you mean endowed by wealth, the answer is no! Only recall a vivid example of utter failure in the history of our theatre. Perhaps a Minister of Fine Arts will do? America, from the continental view point at least, has a mania for creating "boards", bureaus" and "blocs". The same critic has said that "the way to ascertain the truth about anything (in the United States) whether in the realms of exact knowledge, in the purple zone of the fine arts or in the empyrean reaches of metaphysics, is to take a vote upon it!", and it is strange that some aspiring Congressman has not conceived the idea of legislating art upon the country and of thus proclaiming himself to all men as another member of Mencken's "booboisie". While the Government may foster a plan for the raising of more corn and potatoes, it cannot, from the nature of the case, force an art idea upon the people before they are ready for it. Experience and observation of the theatre in Europe advises us that the theatre in America must spring up locally, wherever the interest is sufficient to furnish the motive. It must be willing to work without fame, even without

recognition, and yet it should have the nourishment or our interest and encouragement.

The theatre should be regarded as the other educational institutions are regarded. It should be the natural compliment of the library, the art gallery, the music hall, although we must shamefacedly confess that even these institutions are beggars in America. We are asking the artist of the theatre to work for art's sake without any assistance from us, and yet if we apply the same doctrine to the painters and sculptors, we shall have nothing better than plaster-paris statuettes and "God Bless Our Home" placards as art products. Education is practically the only institution to which we can point with pride and even that, in the light of the antics of the present day culture, must be questioned. Our pride in education as a national product is based on its financial control and its highly specialized organization of mass knowledge and not on its ability to develop finer intelligence and sane self-reliance.

If then the organization of our national school system has any basis for such pride, and if the history of the theatre can prove its part in the development of all peoples, why does not the opportunity for our national theatre lie in the combination of these two elements? Why is not the educational system of the United States the place to develop the drama as a counteracting agent to the "explosives" of our "age of confusion"? Augustus Thomas has said in an article on "An American National Theatre", "I believe that a National Theatre

should be nation wide, and I believe that the co-operation of professional and experienced producers is essential. It is in the hearts of the youth of America--that must be its permament home. American youth must provide the very life blood for it; must provide its ideas; the construction of those ideas into written drama; provide the energy for their production, for their expression, their impersonation, their voice. And in this undertaking, the youth of America is entitled to and must have the guidance and help of men and women now educated and practised in the profession; of public spirited citizens; the guidance and help of the many universities already awake to the demands, and of those that shall become so, and especially of those universities favorably situated in the various sections of the country." Here, in the educational system of our country, lies the opportunity to manifest the service of the theatre.

As we study this educational system, we see that it is not an institution within direct federal control, but is a product and a function distinct to each state. Yet the several states do not differ widely in the performance and operation of this system as far as the machinery of it is concerned. In general, it consists of a graded school, a high school, and reaches its height in most states (a few easter states excepted) in a state college or university. How can the theatre fit into such a scheme? To develop our idea in a general way let us take the educational scheme and conditions of some state, say North Dakota, because of its remoteness and newness, and be-

cause of our familiarity with its problems, and see if we cannot open up an opportunity to bring forth from the soil and intelligent drama and a dramatic intelligence.

A cursory examination of the state schools brings our attention first of all to the numberless rural districts, inadequate in many respects and attended by children whose very life blood is tied up with work and a knowledge of the soil. Next come the graded schools of the villages and towns, which, because of their proximity and regularity, add a little more to the life of the youthful aspirant than the intermittent and unsatisfactory rural sessions. Towns with large enough population and an average economic income maintain a high school giving meagre preparation for life or for further intellectual activity. To those who have the desire, courage and money, an opportunity is given to attend the State University at Grand Forks, the Agricultural College at Fargo, or any one of the several Normal Schools of the state. Here is a graduated opportunity for knowledge open to any young person of capable mentality and average means with all expenses, other than actual living, paid by the state through its method of taxation.

Further examination reveals only two dramatic organizations of any note in the state. One is at the Agricultural College under the direction of Arnold G. Arvold who is doing good missionary work for a limited group. The other, called the Dakota Playmakers, is at the University and was first organized by Frederick Koch who is now of North Carolina fame.

It is this second organization that should interest us, not only because it is located at the leading educational institution of the state, but because it has been and is being carried on by the students themselves without the aid of a press agent, and without the direction of a special leader other than an enthusiastic member of the English faculty.

These young people carry for their aim the modest desire "to promote the cause of amateur dramatics in the university and in the state by the study, the composition, and the staging of good plays, and by the discussion at stated meetings of all the arts of the theatre". So popular is their aim that each year an average of one hundred fifty students try out for a place on the Reserve Membership, each willing to wait his election on the Active Roll. In spite of a lack of unified attack on existing problems, and a poverty of equipment, they have been instrumental in obtaining courses in play presentation, play-making, and modern plays, through the channels of the English department. They hold monthly study programs and presentation of plays besides a more or less undertain tour of the state with a few of their productions. They publish their original plays for the use of the high schools of the state, give advice and assistance to those schools in the matter of dramatic literature and stage craft, and keep a unique bound record of each year's work of the organization. They can point with pride to such a man as Maxwell Anderson, co-author of "What Price Glory", as a product of their efforts.

However, the one feature they might claim as being

original and unique with them is the fostering, throughout the state, of the Junior Playmakers, a series of dramatic organizations in the different high schools established by some senior Playmaker in the course of his or her teaching career. This Junior child becomes a unit of a state wide movement and is affiliated with the parent organization at the University where it receives aid and inspiration in a common get-to-gether Playmaker Festival held each year. It is upon this last achievement, still in the process of growth, that we wish to lay emphasis as having a possibility for the development of a national theatre in the state. Surely any high school student who comes under the influence of this "St. Paul" of the drama, cannot help but carry the contagion of that influence into the rural communities of the state. Here, without an amendmend to the constitution or the enactment of a new law, has appeared an opportunity for a correlation of the theatre and education; here is the beginning of the dramatic intelligence and the intelligent drama.

The organization as we have outlined it above lacks unified purpose and a trained inspirational leader, but it has the rare quality of being born of the needs and longings of a young people. It has its roots in the heart of the people, a thing to which no leader, no matter how impressive may be his reputation in the Theatre Magazine, can lay claim. The fact that very few of these young people have any real knowledge of the technic of the theatre and the form of the drama, has not hindered the growth of the spirit; the fact that the citizens of the state, or the authorities of the

University have never given them any material assistance, has not deterred them in their experiments. They feel this need of people of authority in the field of the theatre, but the inability to have such a leader has not dampened their enthusiasm. They have the roots of a drama embedded in the soil and now need what Thomas spoke of---guidance and sympathy. They need the assistance of a board of administration and a president who can recognize the value they may have in shaping a state's life. This assistance Should come in the form af a trained leader in the profession, and not an over-worked English professor; it should come in the form of adequate classes and room for experiment. The department of public accounting is given an extra instructor and the course is well advertised as a new feature, but the drama with a native urge behind it is entirely ignored. It is true that the president and the board can do little in the face of a legislature economical as far as education is concerned. The dependence of an educational teaching force for daily bread and butter upon the whims of an inconstant legislative body is to be lamented, but out faith in the possibilities of this form of education is so strong that we should be inclined to fly in the fact of that body, or do without some of the present institutional frills.

Should these authorities recognize the opportunity they might give to these young people in the way of adequate equipment, it is possible that the inspirational support of the Playmakers might be extended to each high school of the state, and from there to each rural school, and in time, to each individual of the state. It is not our purpose in this

paper to go into the details of such a plan, for the people, like women, are not actuated by reason alone, and the idea must be allowed to develop slowly in its own way. But it is possible to conceive that such a start within the university might be the means of establishing an Art Theatre in the state, and also be the means of supporting a professional theatre. Certainly it would secure an audience for the professional theatre. It is true that many states such as North Carolina and Iowa are already well under way to such a national universal theatre. The movement might in time become large enough to warrant the establishment of a training school for leaders of state drama. The thing we are urging and prophesying is not far-fetched, for already we have a Yale and a Baker. To the man of vision it means a theatrical map not like an octopus with its center in Broadway, but like a chart of the educational institutions of the country with a local contact in all parts of the United States.

The change and development cannot come overnight, for a drama of the people is never the work of a magician. It is the dream of a dreamer; the dream of a youth to be realized in his mellow sixties. Only the intervening years of wisdom, sympathy, and understanding, with the constant burning of the flame of youth's enthusiasm, will provide a permament home for the theatre in America. It is the passing on of the lighted torch of wisdom, the sharing of the experience of the present theatre with the generations to follow, that shall make drama the "abstract and brief chronicle of the time". To the dreamer, the national theatre in American is to be a reality.

SUMMARY.

The world is experiencing a renaissance in the theatre arising from the desires and needs of a people for an expression of the creative spirit. European countries have already passed through a form of revolt and are not turning their eyes toward America.

America is on the threshold of something new in the theatre. The reawakened interest in the drama signifies that the transitional period of today is but a stepping stone to the new drama of tomorrow. The different forces like the professional, little and college theatres are struggling, each in its own way, with the different problems peculiar to it. But a theatre, that is to be national in spirit must be founded, not in a building or body of actors entirely, but in a native impulse of the people themselves.

To insure an audience of enthusiasts there must be some means of developing their appreciation and understanding. This can be done best thru the medium of the present educational system. It is here that an opportunity for a national theatre lies.

The theatre to be a stable thing cannot cut itself off from the past. Along with the new it must ever pay homage to the old; it must provide a place for spirited relaxation; it must provide a dramatic in elligence and an intelligent drama.

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